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CHAPTER 1

CURATING

THE

'FAMILY'

ALBUM



Deceived with Kindness by Angelica Garnett challenged comfortable Bloomsbury memoirs about 'old friends' and 'great friends'.¹ It was published in 1984, some years after the deaths of Garnett's parents, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, and that of her husband, Grant's former lover, David Garnett. She had moved back to Charleston towards the end of Grant's life and became actively involved, together with Quentin and Anne Olivier Bell, in the restoration of the house after his death in 1978. For Garnett, however, Bloomsbury's powerful identity could overwhelm. She describes a photograph of her grandmother, Julia Stephen, in *Deceived with Kindness* and the merging of her sense of her own identity with that of her mother and grandmother: 'for me at least half its meaning lies in its resemblance to Vanessa herself. It is not so much the physical likeness as the resemblance of gesture and intention' (fig. 1.1).² She describes 'a hesitation in the hand raised towards the light, a doubt betrayed by the subtle and gracious lines of the pose, which links Julia and Vanessa close together. I know that I too sometimes take such poses.'³



Garnett was raised to be acutely conscious of her physical likeness to her mother and a maternal ancestry that exemplified Victorian standards of beauty. Because she was illegitimate and brought up believing Clive Bell to be her father this emphasis obscured a likeness to Grant that was obvious to everyone around her. It was never openly discussed. Numerous photographs of Angelica with her mother and her half-brothers locate her within the Bell family. Vanessa was one of Bloomsbury's most prolific amateur photographers and images of Angelica with her father, in which the facial resemblance is striking, are rare. The cover image for the American edition of *Deceived with Kindness* is a cut-out from a photograph by Vanessa of Angelica sitting confidently on her lap (fig. 1.2).⁴ The image revolves around the relationship between their two faces side-by-side. Angelica looks straight at the camera while her mother's face is presented in profile, observing her daughter. There is a trace, perhaps, of *The Three Ages of Man* after Giorgione,

1.1 Gabriel Loppé, Julia Stephen at the Bear Hotel, Grindelwald, Switzerland, 1889. The Charleston Trust



J.T., V.S., A.V.S., Julia, & L.S. (outdoor)



V.S. Julia & L.S. (during 1877)



Julia & Julia (1874)



Miss Brown, Julia, George, Harold, V.S., J.T., & L.S. (1874)



Julia & Julia (garden bench)



1874



1873



(1872) at her desk in the drawing room



Julia, L.S., Henry James



1874



L.S., Julia, Henry James



(L.S.)



Graveyard (church yard)



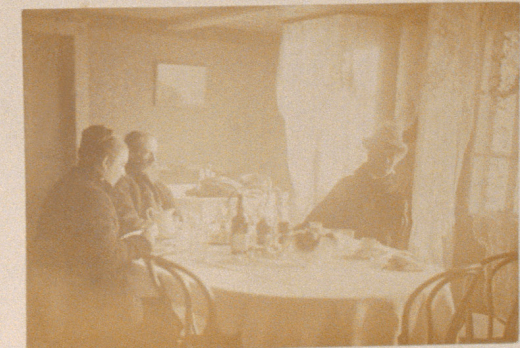
In the 'Parl' in Graveland



L.S., Julia, Richard, Henry (at Arrington)



in Graveland



Miss L.S., L.S., Julia (at Graveland)

you think of him.’⁹² These leaves in the Monk’s House album serve to memorialize Woolf’s father and brother.

George Beresford set up his studio in Yeomans Row off the Brompton Road in South Kensington, hardly more than a mile away from the Stephen family home in Hyde Park Gate, in 1902. Virginia first sat to him in July of that year. Beresford had trained at the Slade after an early career in India. He and Rudyard Kipling had been school friends at the United Services College at Westward Ho! and Beresford was the inspiration for Kipling’s character of M’Turk in *Stalky and Co.* A brief career as a civil engineer in Bombay was curtailed, possibly by malaria, when he was 24 and he returned to England in 1888 to study and work in the still-emerging field of portrait photography. Just as Jacques-Emile Blanche made a living in Paris and Dieppe painting portraits of famous artists and writers, for which there was an open market, so Beresford specialized in photographs of artists and writers,

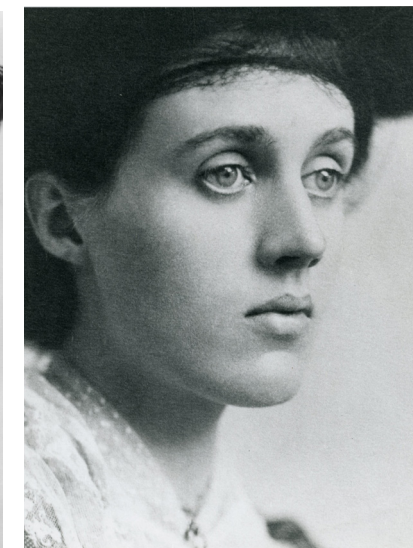


drawing on his friendships and contacts from the Slade. These could then be sold to the *Illustrated London News*, *Tatler*, *Sketch*, and other papers and periodicals. He was prolific. In his first year alone his sitters included Auguste Rodin, Augustus John, Alphonse Legros, Henry Tonks, J. M. Barrie, and David Lloyd George, as well as the Stephen family. Beresford is likely to have been aware of Cameron’s portraits of Leslie and Julia Stephen and, as an eminent literary figure nearing the end of his life, Sir Leslie Stephen would have been an appealing subject. He had been awarded a knighthood in the coronation honours list in June 1902. Where Cameron’s photographs capture Stephen’s vigour and intensity, Beresford’s portraits, taken 30 years later, reveal his frailty. His famous ‘bright-red beard, radiating in fan-shape’ was now thin and grizzled, and his once piercing blue eyes betray a haunted anxiety and melancholy.⁹³ There are two surviving versions of the double portrait with Virginia and in both she is the background figure, slightly out of focus. In one, father and daughter incline their heads slightly towards each other, as if in conversation.⁹⁴ In the print that Virginia selected for her photograph album, however, she is leaning towards her father and twisting to present her profile at an angle that replicates his. The shot is designed to accentuate their likeness.

Virginia was 20 and unpublished when Beresford produced the iconic portrait that most frequently represents her (fig. 1.40). It is one of the National Portrait Gallery’s best-selling postcards.⁹⁵ Again, it is one of a series of related images created at a single sitting and it appears to have been commissioned by her half-brother, George Duckworth. She wrote to Violet Dickinson from Fritham early in August:

I’m afraid Nessa raised your hopes too high, and you will be very much disappointed – but the man hasn’t sent the photographs yet – and they mayn’t do me justice – indeed I don’t expect they will. If you are very kind to me, and spoil me thoroughly, and behave in every way tenderly you shall have one when you come here. (They belong to George.)⁹⁶

1.40 George Beresford, Virginia Woolf, 1902. National Portrait Gallery, London



Vanessa Bell was also given at least two prints. A large photograph was captioned ‘Adeline Virginia Stephen’ and given its own leaf in one of her albums, and a few pages further on a smaller print was grouped with later photographs of Bell and her children.⁹⁷ It is mistakenly dated ‘A.V.S. 1903’. Beresford’s book of sitters records that 14 photographs were taken of Virginia in July 1902 together with an unspecified number of Vanessa and six portraits of their father at the same sitting. As the family gathered around Sir Leslie in anticipation of his operation, George Duckworth may well have organized the session. It is also plausible, given the responsibility he assumed for his sisters’ ‘coming out’ into fashionable society, that he was anxious to have portraits of them in their chaste white lace in anticipation of a period of mourning, if their father’s operation was unsuccessful, that would necessitate their withdrawal from the balls and events where husbands might be secured for them. This may explain Virginia’s anxiety in her letter to Violet Dickinson.

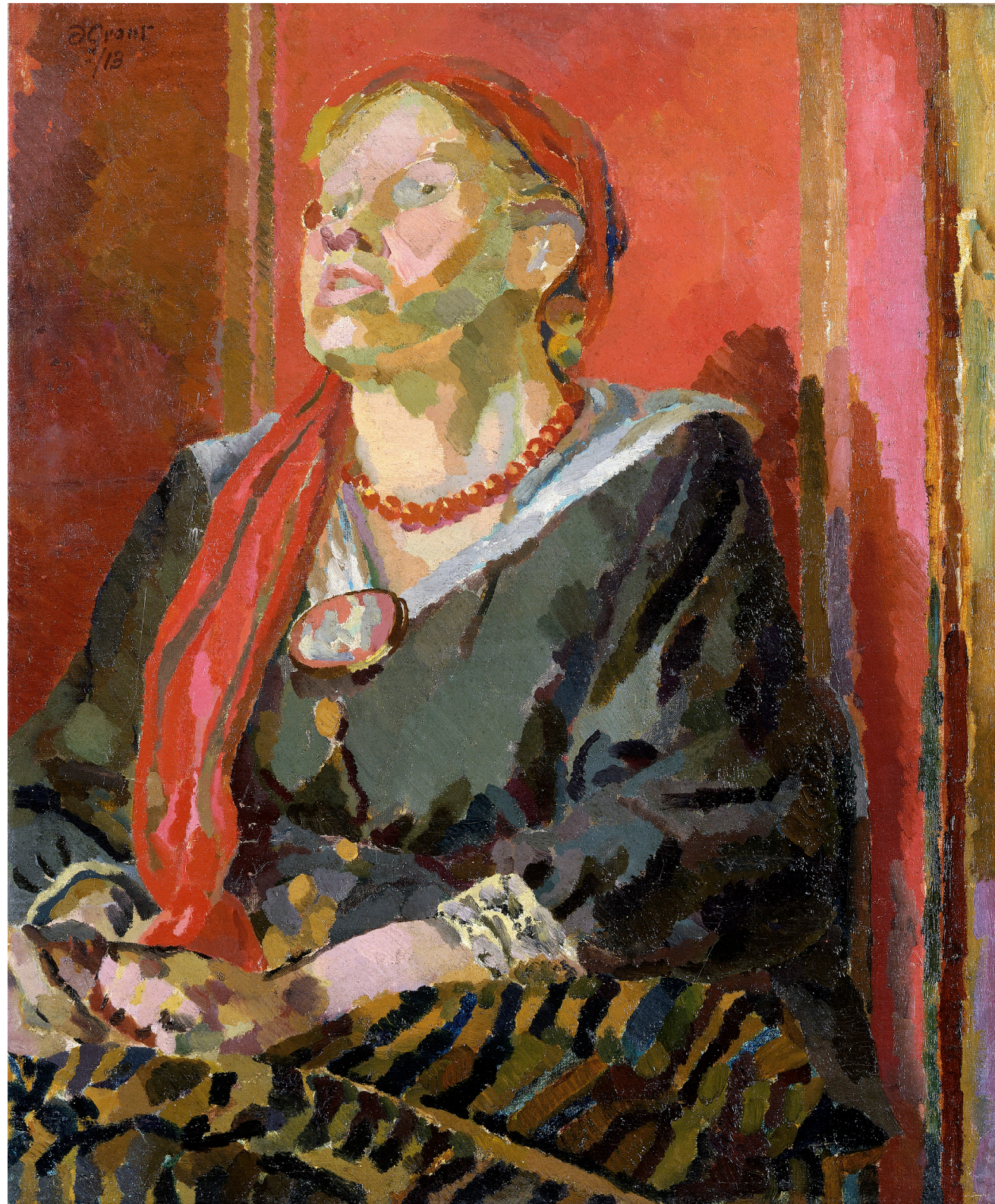
Beresford portrays the sisters as classic beauties (fig. 1.41). They offer their faces to the camera as their mother had done nearly 40 years earlier and replicate her expressions of wistful composure. Beresford’s technical brilliance softens their features, the aquiline perfection of their noses, their large eyes, and the

expressive and yet ambiguous curves of their lips. Their faces almost fill the frame, set against pale backgrounds. In his portraits of Virginia the tonal range is restrained, accentuating the delicacy of her pale skin, offset by lustrous dark hair that escapes in wisps from its elaborate knot. He photographed Vanessa again, five years later, around the time of her engagement and marriage (figs 1.42 and 1.43). In these photographs the lighting is more dramatic. Her face is lit to create deep shadows and highlights and, although cropped out of the print that most frequently represents her, she is dressed in a large, fashionable hat, resplendent with feathers. She is in mourning for Thoby, perhaps dressed for her own wedding, and the hat’s black netting has been lifted away from her face. A heart-shaped locket rests on the lace bib that covers the neckline of her dark dress. It is ironic that these conventional images of the Stephen sisters’ innocence and feminine beauty co-existed, throughout their lives, with the images that represented their modernity. When Mabel Selwood, Quentin’s nurse, left Charleston to be married, Vanessa gave her a Beresford print as a memento and, as a wedding gift, she was invited to choose a painting. In addition to a Post-Impressionist landscape of Bosham church by Grant, she took a recent, and experimental, portrait by Grant of Bell (fig. 1.44).

The cropped version of Beresford’s portrait of Bell,

1.41 (left) George Beresford, Vanessa Bell, 1902. The Charleston Trust
1.42 (middle) George Beresford, Vanessa Bell in mourning for her brother Thoby, 1907. Getty Images

1.43 (right) George Beresford, Vanessa Bell, 1907. The Charleston Trust. This iconic image is a cropped version of a photograph taken during the same sitting as fig. 1.42, when Vanessa was in mourning for Thoby



She described his charismatic leadership: 'Under his influence the country near Cambridge was full of young men and women walking barefoot, sharing his passion for bathing and fish diet'.⁸⁴ A photograph of Woolf herself, taken in 1911, with Rupert Brooke, Noel Oliver (with whom he was in love) and Maitland Radford shows her assimilating the dress code of a Neo Pagan in a blouse and skirt with a long headscarf tied at the nape of her neck (fig. 2.40).⁸⁵ She was not entirely taken in by the Neo Pagans, however, describing Brooke as 'self-conscious in the highest degree'. 'It was an amusing disguise . . . a game played for the fun of it, an experiment in living by one keenly inquisitive and incessantly fastidious . . . which had to live side by side with highly sophisticated tastes.'⁸⁶ Her insights are revealing because they reflect her own self-conscious experiments with appearances and identity.

Woolf's early friendships with the Neo Pagans coincided with her move to the country. Before moving to Asheham she rented a semi-detached cottage in the Sussex village of Firlie from January 1911 and immediately invited her friends to stay. Within weeks of taking the lease she wrote to Morrell, 'I've got to go down and make curtains and move beds at the cottage, having been so rash as to ask 5 people to stay the week after. Nessa is bringing a sewing machine.'⁸⁷ 'Dressing' this rural retreat in the heart of the South Downs was part of establishing her own identity, and although her sister was the more experienced designer and decorator, Woolf wrote to Violet Dickinson in the singular about the excitement of 'furnishing my cottage, and staining the floors the colour of the Atlantic in a storm'.⁸⁸ Molly MacCarthy gave her a comfortable chair and she wrote to thank her, describing the cottage as a 'villa' and 'inconceivably ugly' but 'done up in patches of post-impressionist colour'.⁸⁹ It was a relatively new house, half-timbered in accordance with Edwardian suburban fashions, and Woolf used the term 'villa' sardonically. 'It's right underneath the downs,' she wrote, 'and though itself an eyesore, still that dont matter when one's inside.' Bell's group portrait *Conversation Piece* represents the first-floor sitting room at the cottage, named 'Little Talland House' by Woolf after their childhood holiday home in Cornwall (see fig. 2.7).⁹⁰ In her painting,

pictures are balanced on the mantel shelf on either side of the mirror, the floor is a dark grey, tinged with brown and mauve in Bell's brushwork, and some of the Post-Impressionist patches of colour are provided by red, orange, and mauve loose covers for an assortment of chairs. One of these, an Edwardian wing-backed chair, also features in Bell's portraits of Woolf. There is further evidence for Woolf taking ownership of the decorative scheme. She concluded her letter to Clive Bell anticipating the arrival of 'Neo Pagan Cox' in April 1911, 'This house has been turned into a very comfortable villa. . . . The tailor having refused to make chair covers, I have persuaded the dressmaker.'⁹¹

Ka Cox shared an interest with the Bloomsbury Group in textiles and interiors. She gave the Woolfs embroideries as a wedding present in 1912, to decorate their rooms in London. Virginia described fastening them 'first to a table, then a sofa, finally to our 2 arm chairs'.⁹² She wrote to Leonard, describing one of Cox's visits to Asheham soon afterwards: 'Ka and I stitch, gossip, grumble, as you can imagine.'⁹³ Woolf's letters and diaries describe her pleasure in the colours



2.39 Duncan Grant, *Katherine Cox*, 1912 or 1913. Oil on canvas, 759 × 627 mm. National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

2.40 Unknown, (left to right) Noel Olivier, Maitland Radford, Virginia Woolf, and Rupert Brooke, 1911. National Portrait Gallery, London





and to champion and support. It also stimulated their creative skills to articulate critical theories that were published in catalogues and picked up by the press, and to originate new and experimental work. Although Virginia Woolf described artists as ‘an abominable race’ and was dismissive of the ‘furious excitement’ surrounding their exhibitions at the end of 1912, she was fascinated by Post-Impressionism and originated a literary counterpart to it.⁷⁰ The Group was not insular in its exhibition choices. Grant exhibited with the Camden Town Group, which was led by Sickert and first exhibited at the Carfax Gallery in 1911, and accepted an invitation to show with the Vorticists.⁷¹

After the outbreak of the First World War Bloomsbury continued to showcase experimental work and to introduce the work of new artists from Britain and abroad through its exhibitions at the Omega Workshops. Bell’s first solo exhibition was staged in a single room at the Workshops for two weeks in February 1916. Although there was no catalogue and very little correspondence casts light on the exhibition, Omega would have provided Bell with a ‘safe space’ within which to build on her experience as a curator in a display of her own creative identity. She chose to include her work as a designer and maker alongside her paintings, writing to Fry in January that she was making artificial flowers for the Workshops: ‘I thought I might show mine with my pictures.’⁷² These were signature Omega products, worn as buttonholes or arranged in vases, and all three of its co-directors painted them in still lives (fig. 4.9).⁷³ They were exotic, sculptural constructions made out of tarlatan, stiffened with size and decorated with striking patterns and colours. Winifred Gill described the tarlatan, or ‘book muslin’, as a fine, open-weave cotton commonly used in the ballet skirts of stage fairies. The Workshops brewed their own size, a clear paste that was brushed over fabric to stiffen it, making the fabric ‘like paper so that the colours did not run’ when it was painted.⁷⁴ The inclusion of Omega Flowers in Bell’s exhibition would thus have complemented the abstract content in her paintings. The show may have assembled an existing body of recent still lives and portraits, as Collins has suggested, perhaps relating to Bell’s Omega dress

collection, painted the previous year.⁷⁵ Her portrait of Mary Hutchinson, with its extraordinary palette and abstract background, is likely to have been included (see fig. 3.24, p. XXX). It was praised by Walter Sickert in his ‘monthly chronicle’ for the *Burlington Magazine* in April 1916. ‘Let us have Vanessa Bell’s *Portrait of Mrs. Hutchinson*’, he wrote, assembling an imaginary list of paintings from recent exhibitions that he found admirable.⁷⁶ A review in *The Times*, however, objected that Bell’s still lives and portraits were ‘aesthetic experiments’ exploring the ‘method’ of painting: ‘the method will seem merely an absurd scribbling with paint . . . in her own way, Mrs. Bell, after the manner of English artists, seems to be aiming too much at beauty, a beauty not of the objects represented, but of calligraphy in paint or of abstract design.’⁷⁷

While some paintings and exhibitions were designed to position their artists’ reputations within the complex network of London’s groups and clubs, others were undoubtedly made with the market in mind. Sales and commissions were essential to the financial survival of the Omega Workshops as well as to the income and status of its artists. Bell itemized the sales at the second

Grafton Group exhibition in a letter to Grant, concluding: ‘I don’t know if we shall quite cover expenses.’⁷⁸ Her letters often negotiated a delicate balance between creative prowess and financial dependence, particularly on Grant’s behalf. She wrote to Morrell on Omega Workshops paper soon after her solo show: ‘It was most splendid of you to get your brother to buy 3 of Duncan’s pictures and I think it will tide him over many difficulties.’ She added that it would be ‘quite absurd’, however, for Morrell to buy one of her own paintings: ‘if you really did like any enough to want to have it, I should be so glad to give it to you.’⁷⁹ Her offer to gift rather than to sell a painting subverts the conventional relationship between artist and wealthy patron, and the letter might be read as a subtle challenge to the sincerity of Morrell’s support: ‘I know how pictures accumulate in one’s house and if one doesn’t like them, they’re such a nuisance.’⁸⁰

The Group’s letters illuminate the private narratives inherent in owning and displaying one another’s work

4.9 Vanessa Bell, *Omega Paper Flowers in a Bottle*, c.1915. Oil on canvas, 305 × 330 mm. Private collection

It seems to me a triumphant and superb work of art, and produces in me the sensation of being a tropical fish afloat in warm waves over submerged forests of emerald and ruby. You may well ask what sort of forest that is – I reply it is the sort of fish I am.¹⁴⁶

The letter playfully asserts that the tropical environment created by the carpet would pervade Woolf's art as well as her life. Bell included the carpet in a full-length portrait of her sister, staged in the interior that she and Grant had created for Woolf at Tavistock Square. In Bell's portrait the spare simplicity of the sitting room, as represented in *Vogue* a decade earlier (see fig. 1.47, p. XXX), is more fully inhabited. The table has been pushed up against the bookcase (which is now taller), piled with books, and ornamented with a vase of tulips. Woolf's chintz-covered armchair occupies a corner of the room so



that her head is framed, in the portrait, by one of the Bell and Grant painted panels. This large, formal portrait represents Woolf as a celebrated author. Her mask-like expression is austere and the low vantage point effectively elevates the sitter. It was painted for Bell's solo exhibition at the Lefevre Galleries in March 1934, for which Woolf wrote the catalogue preface.¹⁴⁷ She describes her supportive role at the private view, encouraging Bell's buyers 'until I had no tongue to praise with left'.¹⁴⁸ The portrait sold immediately to an admirer of Woolf's writing but she retained a photograph of it (fig. 4.22), and the following year Bell presented Leonard Woolf with her study for the painting as a Christmas present.¹⁴⁹



The visual and intellectual agility with which Bloomsbury was able to adapt to different social, political, and creative contexts was one of its many strengths. Its Group identity was deliberately elusive and often playful but its engagement with the events and key figures of its period was wide-ranging and effective. This is illustrated by Woolf's diary in the days immediately preceding Bell's private view. She received a visit from Sickert to thank her for her article 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation'. As a subscriber for a 75th-birthday celebration concert of Ethel Smyth's work at the Albert Hall, she filled her allocation of seats in the stalls with her Bloomsbury friends and associates. The concert was conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham and attended by the queen and court. Afterwards Bloomsbury delighted in Smyth's audacity in subverting social conventions by entertaining her aristocratic supporters in a Lyons Corner House, 'a sordid crumby room . . . amid clerks & shop girls eating cream buns'.¹⁵⁰ Bloomsbury assembled at the Arts Theatre Club the following night to watch Lydia Lopokova in her debut as an actor in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, with Keynes sitting in the stalls 'streaming tears'.¹⁵¹ The Group's letters and diaries, its memoirs, photographs, and portraits provide insights into the extent of its network and the texture of Bloomsbury

4.20 Stephen Tomlin, cast of his 1931 bust of Virginia Woolf, photographed in the studio at Charleston. Painted plaster, 400 × 390 × 220 mm. The Charleston Trust



lives with their complex and varied professional and personal interactions. Their tone, often designed to entertain or to shake out the essentials of a situation, belies the significance of Bloomsbury's contribution to 20th-century culture, economics, and politics. Keynes remained a committed supporter of the arts throughout his life, using his influence to devise schemes and institutions to fund contemporary practice, ultimately leading to the foundation of the Arts Council. Once they became figures of the establishment, Bloomsbury's authors, artists, publishers, and critics no longer depended upon the robust and protective identity of the Group to frame and explore new ideas. They continued, nevertheless, to subvert conventions and challenge the boundaries of modernity. Bloomsbury's social and artistic porosity, and its rejection of dogma, of formal memberships and manifestos, make its influence and its distinctive identity difficult to chart, as they emerge only through

4.21 Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, *The Music Room*, installation exhibited at Lefevre Galleries, London, in 1932. The Charleston Trust

detailed investigation. It was this understated porosity, however, that ensured Bloomsbury's success and its longevity as a group.

Bloomsbury's identity was rooted in the intellectual and colonial family backgrounds that are documented in its childhood snapshots and studio photographs. It kept this visual legacy close. Its framed photographs and family albums served as a set of references in later years. They were reminders of the family narratives and shared identities from school and university years that underpinned Bloomsbury's sense of itself. They informed the memories and publications through which the Group framed its own historiography, but Bloomsbury's Victorian and Edwardian photographs were not confined to the past. Bell and Woolf explored the currency of their bank of Cameron images in interiors, publications, and paintings. Woolf used them as a matrilineal inheritance to impress Vita Sackville-West and as inspiration for her antidote to fashion,